The Last Riddle

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ADVICE ON LIVING & DYING WELL
FROM THE
IMPRISONED SAINT THOMAS MORE

STEPHEN SMITH
FOREWORD BY CARDINAL VINCENT NICHOLS

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Foreword

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This remarkable book contains the last will and testament of one of the greatest saints of his time: Saint Thomas More. He is well known to us as the Lord Chancellor and confidante of Henry VIII, as the writer of *Utopia*, and as the courageous martyr whose struggles were vividly brought to life in Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons*.

This volume presents his prison writings, letters, and prayers. Some of them were written by means of a piece of coal in the darkness of captivity. These documents allow us a valuable insight into the mind and heart of this saint. We are transported behind the bars of his cell. Here we discover a calmness and peace, a sense of joy and hope. The reality of imprisonment was, of course, stark and horrific—he worried about his family and friends, he endured worsening health, he found himself at the mercy of others—and yet there is never a note of anger or panic. If his body was confined, his spirit was free. He never changed his mind or compromised the truth. The care of his soul and conscience always came first, whatever the consequences: "I shall never be able to change mine own conscience to the contrary," he wrote. "As for other men's, I will not meddle of."

This Renaissance man continued to value the gifts of family and friendship. He gave them advice and comfort, and interceded for them. Indeed, he signed some of his letters "your beadsman," meaning one who constantly prays for others. In his final hours, he willingly prayed for his enemies: "Bear no malice nor evil will to no man living."

Saint Thomas More is a compelling role model not only for all those in positions of authority—it is no accident that Pope Saint John Paul II declared him the patron of politicians—but for anyone facing difficult decisions on matters of conscience. He shows that we can endure great adversity, even death itself, and yet come to fulfillment.

May he pray for us, so that one day we may merrily be together in heaven.

Introduction

WELCOME TO THE TOWER OF LONDON

I remember standing in a quiet room in the Tower of London—the prison house of Saint Thomas More (1478–1535)—for the first time when I was a younger man. Through an arrow-slit window I could see light and some little glimpse of water moving and glimmering beyond the wall. I was standing in the full bare cell of an imprisoned man who understood the end of his life as a living out of the ultimate riddle: how a man "may lose his head and yet have none harm, but instead of harm inestimable good at the hand of God," as he puts it in one of the unforgettable letters written from the Tower.[1]

A hopeless admirer and student of Shakespeare, I had been drawn to the study of his great predecessor Thomas More through the example of a teacher and friend. The next thing I knew, I was reading More's works and teaching them in England to a group of excellent young students. The crowning end of the three-week class was a visit to the Tower of London—and before I knew it, I found myself standing and reflecting in the strange silence of that prison cell. The Beefeater who led us into the cell had remarked gruffly yet with the ghost of a smile, "Welcome to the Tower of London."

The collective force of reading More's writing and following his footsteps stirred in me a great passion of wonder over the man, his mind, his manner of life, and his memorable death. How could this witty and winning man, this talented and experienced leader, this famous father and friend, this great writer

1. *The Essential Works of Thomas More*, ed. Gerard B. Wegemer and Stephen W. Smith (Yale University Press, 2020), 1325.72–74.

and judge, this devoted soul of prayer, have found himself in the Tower of London at the last—and facing the testing point of his life? How was it possible to play such a part as More played, in life and unto death on Tower Hill? Is it possible now?

I will not say how I answered such questions in my early life, but I remain grateful not only to the memory of Thomas More but to the writings that survived the Tower and have come down to us, especially his personal letters and prayers.

The goal of this short book is to share the imprisoned Thomas More's mind, heart, and vision with readers through an account of these last letters and prayers. You hold the best of More's head and heart in your hands, dear reader. I hope you will be challenged by his words and learn from them how to live that ultimate mysterious riddle: to lose your head and yet have no harm, "but instead of harm inestimable good." More's prison letters and prayers are not so much a self-help book on how to approach decapitation (though one senses this good-humored author might approve of such a jest). Rather, these eloquent writings help readers see death and life rarely and beautifully as Saint Thomas More himself did, under the seemingly worst circumstances. More's words are a great saint's last loving acts of service and true care, composed for his own good and for the enduring benefit of anyone who accompanies their author on his fifteen-month pilgrimage to Tower Hill—and beyond.

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF A STATESMAN: WHO WAS SAINT THOMAS MORE?

Born in London in 1478, Thomas More was the son of John More, a judge, and he hailed from a family with a tradition of civic service, public spiritedness, and good wit. The brilliant More was educated in London, served as a page in Cardinal John Morton's court, and studied at the University of Oxford before returning to London to study law. He was called to the bar in 1501. At this

time, the young More also frequented the London Charterhouse of the Carthusians, where he received spiritual support and considered a possible vocation. (Members of this community would join More years later in martyrdom following their courageous opposition to King Henry.) Discerning that his own path was marriage and not religious life, More married Jane Colt in 1505, with whom he had four children. Sadly, Jane died in childbirth in 1511. Shortly afterward, More married Alice Middleton, an older, virtuous, savvy, well-to-do, and spirited widow.

From early on, the young More distinguished himself as a leading citizen of London and as an aspiring humanist and writer, especially through his friendship with Erasmus, John Colet, and others. As Erasmus remarked in a famous letter about him, Thomas More was a man "designed and born" for friendship.[2] Erasmus also noted that his friend More loved learning, liberty, leisure, and equality strongly, while having a corresponding antipathy for tyranny. Erasmus also attests to More's personal virtue and integrity—and his striking piety. Regarding More's faith, Erasmus writes, "True piety finds in him a practicing follower, though far removed from all superstition. He has his fixed hours at which he says his prayers, and they are not conventional but come from the heart. When he talks with his friends about the life after death, you recognize that he is speaking from conviction, and not without good hope. And More is like this even at court. What becomes then of those people who think that Christians are not to be found except in monasteries?"[3] In this same letter, Erasmus gives his dear friend a beautiful and apt title: "You might call More," Erasmus writes in admiring fashion, "the general resource of everyone who needs help."[4]

In addition to working and loving his friends heartily and skillfully, More was devoted to his growing family. As he wrote in

2. *Essential Works of Thomas More*, 1371.29.
3. *Essential Works of Thomas More*, 1374.27–36.
4. *Essential Works of Thomas More*, 1373.72–73.

Utopia, he was determined not to live as "a stranger" in his own home.[5] Far from abandoning the family ship, More would later form a famous household in Chelsea, on the banks of the Thames River. Several wonderful images of the More family survive, originally painted by Hans Holbein and then copied by others with changes. These family portraits have a beautiful, even iconic character, as admirers have remarked. They glow with warm humanity, rich culture, loving unity, living faith, and winning peace. It is hard not to wonder about this family and their father, thanks originally to Holbein's magnificent art and illuminating eye.

In 1504, the young More became a member of Parliament, and "as a beardless boy" he courageously defied King Henry VII over a subsidy. Beginning in 1510, More worked as Undersheriff of London before entering the royal service in 1518. More then served as Speaker of the House of Commons in 1523, where he made a famous petition for free speech before King Henry VIII, in which he artfully let the king know that men were afraid, it turns out, of speaking their true mind and engaging in deliberations because of the perceived threat of royal displeasure and power. In that same role as Speaker of the House, More led Parliament successfully in a witty showdown with Cardinal Lord Chancellor Thomas Wolsey, who was attempting to squeeze Parliament for cash without due debate. You can still see this tense scene memorialized on a large canvas in Saint Stephen's Hall at the entrance to Parliament. In that image, More points to a book of laws. Thomas More was, among so many other things, a strong and consistent defender of the rule of law in England across his lifetime—and unto death. He also used silence artfully and prudently in that showdown with Wolsey, a powerful strategy he would use again years later during his imprisonment over the oath.

During the 1520s, More also served as High Steward of Oxford and Cambridge, and in 1529 he became Lord Chancellor of England. As Lord Chancellor, More was devoted to serving as

5. *Essential Works of Thomas More*, 154.8.

the custodian of English law and the keeper of the king's conscience. There remains controversy over More's handling of seditious heresy as Lord Chancellor. During his tenure, six men were tried and executed for heresy. More defended their prosecution as lawful, while others have critiqued him as a fanatic. In 1532, after his resignation, More prepared orders for his tomb, composed his epitaph, and sent a copy of the epitaph to his old friend Erasmus. (The epitaph may still be seen today at Chelsea Old Church, where it survived bombings in World War II.) In the letter accompanying the epitaph, More underscores that no one had advanced a single complaint against his integrity and conduct as Lord Chancellor.[6]

In the 1520s and 1530s, England was engulfed in a great tempest of controversies that would ultimately lead to More's death. First, the king sought approval from Rome to divorce Queen Catherine of Aragon on the grounds that the marriage between them had been illicit in the first place. When Rome eventually refused the king's wishes, the stage was set for a remarkable series of decisions and events that would change English history. First, the king worked with Thomas Cromwell and others to bring about the "Submission of the Clergy" to the king in 1532, a legal move of tremendous consequence that was stoutly, and some argue successfully, resisted through the leadership of Lord Chancellor More and Archbishop William Warham.[7] When the clergy eventually submitted to royal power, they were agreeing to make no new laws without the king's approval, and so a *de facto* version of the king as head of the Church in England made its appearance under the cover of this submission. On the day after the Submission of the Clergy, Thomas More resigned the Lord Chancellorship

6. See Richard Rex, "Thomas More and the Heretics: Statesman or Fanatic?," in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, ed. George M. Logan (University of Cambridge Press, 2011), 93–115. This essay remains the most useful account of More's actions as Lord Chancellor. Rex concludes that More was not a fanatic but a prudent statesman.

7. See Gerard Wegemer, "Rule of Law vs. Tyranny: Did Thomas More and Archbishop Warham Fail on May 13–16, 1532?" in *Moreana* 62.1 (2025) for a reappraisal of the resistance to King Henry and the submission of the clergy.